

Notifications are evil

Feb 20, 2012 [CLAY JOHNSON](#)

What's your maximum NPH? **How many notifications are you exposed to every hour?** Let's take a second to think critically about these constant requests for your attention: what do they mean? Who is making them? Why are they there? Before I wrote the [Information Diet](#), I audited myself and found I was receiving upwards of 10 notifications per hour: one every six minutes.

First, let's define notification. In the context of our discussion, a notification is something that comes from a service that the service deems worthy of your attention: The scarlet box at the top of every Google page notifying you of things happening in Google+. The messages you get from Twitter telling you that you have a new message. The email icon that shows up in your system tray telling you that you have a new email. Facebook letting you know what you're missing out on Facebook. Your sister's latest move in Words with Friends.

Why do we have them? Why, suddenly, are our phones a symphonic cacophony of distraction, constantly beckoning for our attention? Is it because there's that much important stuff going on in my life?

Of course not. We're getting so many notifications because the companies that now power the web are engaged in a war with one another to capture our attention. They call it "user engagement" and everybody wants it, so everybody's coming up with as many new ways as possible to capture our attention so that at its base, we can view more advertisements. **These notifications are not meaningful requests for your immediate attention, they're things designed to get you to lose half your day to the service that created them. That's evil.**

For me, the vilest thing that Google has ever done is put that red box on the search-results page. Every Google search now says to me: "we know you're in the middle of searching for something, but we think that you might instead like to immediately know that somebody that you don't know has followed you on Google+, so we've made a bright red box -- the most eye catching and animated thing on the page, just so you know." Google's not doing this because Google+ has actual, relevant information that *requires* my immediate attention. If they were interested in that, they'd give me actual control over what goes into that red box, or give me the ability to shut it off entirely. No -- they're doing this because they want me to use Google+ more, so that they can say that they boosted "user engagement on Google+" on their next earnings call.

Besides being disrespectful to your attention, notifications like this do something else that's much more nefarious: they train you to be a **passive consumer of information rather than an active one**. If we don't control the notifications we're receiving, we're forced to react to them: from Google's big red box, to Living Social's notification for a deal on backwaxing. Left at the default, we create an economy of sensational notifications, with the brightest minds of our generation trying to figure out how to get us to click on the next command for our attention. Can you imagine what would happen if they were instead focused on providing us content worthy of it?

Do yourself a favor: **kill the notifications off**. Don't participate in the notification economy. **Change your relationship from passive to active**. Instead of relying on Facebook to command your attention, schedule a meeting with it. If Facebook's important to you, put 15 minutes on your calendar for it and make that the time that you check Facebook. Kill everything you can with a number by it. **Eliminate anything you can that makes a noise that might tempt you into giving your attention away. The only non-renewable resource you truly have is your time. Next time you're asked to "pay" attention to something, remember that's what you're doing: you're paying. Thank you for yours.**